

Common Baskettail
(female)



Common Baskettail (*Epitheca cynosura*) – 1.6", 38-43 mm

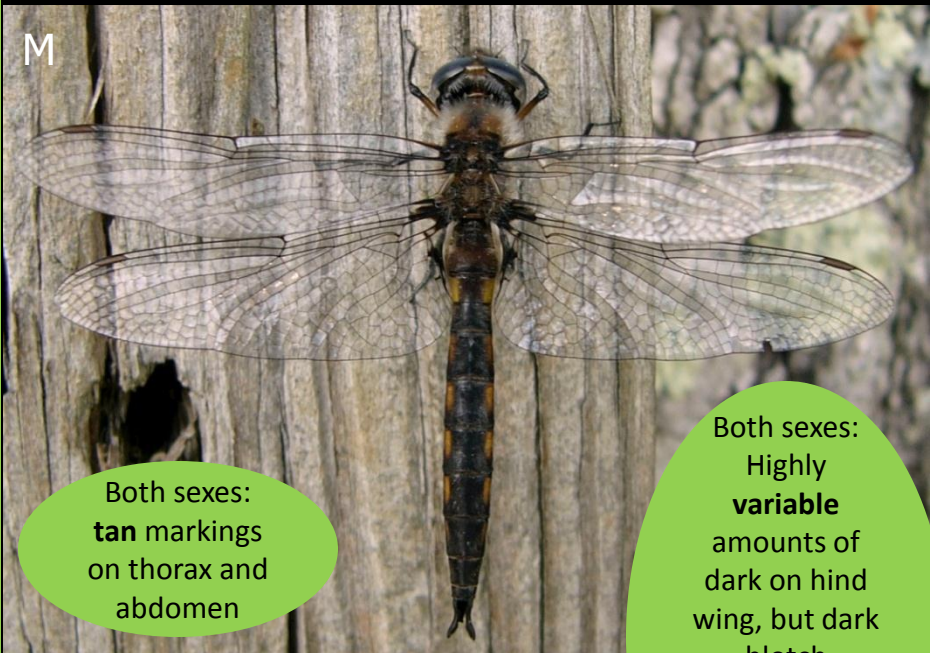
Flight Record:
(4/11-7/01)
Peaks
late April-
May.

Common

Habitat:
Most water
habitats, but
prefers
shallow, slow,
sunny
streams.

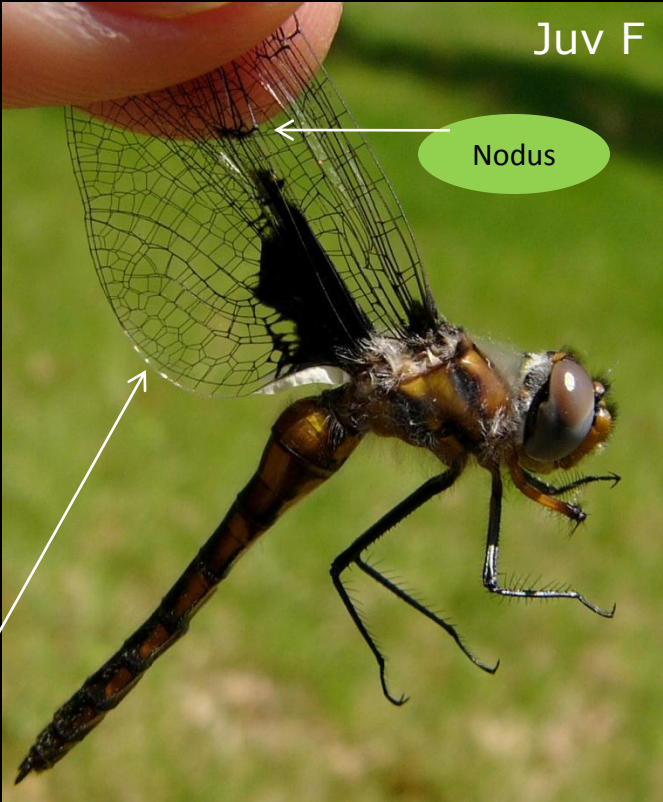
First Glance:
Small, dark,
constantly
hovering.
Fast,
acrobatic
flight. Often
high above
clearings and
sunny
paths/old
roads. Also
along pond,
stream and
river edges.

Compare:
Sundragons,
other
Epitheca



Both sexes:
tan markings
on thorax and
abdomen

Both sexes:
Highly
variable
amounts of
dark on hind
wing, but dark
blotch
rarely
reaches
nodus, and
never bottom
wing edge



Male's cerci
lacks the
top spine
of a Robust
Baskettail



Notes from the field – Common Baskettails:

When I first starting looking for dragonflies, I found the field-guide descriptions, and even the name of this species, *very* frustrating. Guides described them as “abundant” and “occurring in swarms”, and of course the word *common* is right there in the name. However, after several years of field trips and dragonfly counts, I still hadn’t seen even one! When I finally did, I understood why they hadn’t seemed “common”. First off, I’d been walking around ponds in summer, while basket-tails are mostly *spring* species that prefer *streams*. Second, they’re quite small, about the size of a Blue Dasher, and dark with mostly clear-wings, i.e. easy to miss. Lastly, they spend much of their time hovering *high* above clearings. They are probably our least seen “common” dragonfly.

In fact, they *are* quite common in Northern VA, and can even be seen in degraded, semi-urban watersheds. Look for them in May, hovering at the edge of sunny streams and shallow, marshy ponds, or high over forest clearings and old roads.

This species is relatively easy to tell apart from all other dragonflies in our area, with the notable exception of other members of their genus, *Epitheca*. Striped-winged Baskettails (*E. coastalis*) have also been confirmed in N. VA (in Fairfax Co.), but only a few times. Although the Robust



Baskettail (*E. spinosa*) has not, it is seen in MD (Frederick and Prince Georges counties) in swamps along the Potomac, and probably lives somewhere in Northern VA. To tell these two species and the Common Basket-tail apart, one needs to examine the male’s cerci, epiproct and extent of constriction on the 3rd abdominal segment. The male Robust has a tiny spur on top of its cerci tip (the others do not), and the Striped-winged has a more constricted 3rd abdominal segment. Although not impossible, this is difficult , and requires very close-up inspection. I’m happy to simply say that 90% of *Epithecas* found in Northern VA are Common Baskettails, and leave it at that ☺